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SCHUBERT: *Winterreise*

Russell Braun, bar; Carolyn Maule, p
CBC 1171—79 minutes

Many reviewers agree that Fischer-Dieskau's recordings of *Winterreise* are the benchmarks. I became captivated with *Winterreise* through his 1965 LP (for DG with Jörg Demus) when he was in his prime. His 1972 recording (for DG with Gerald Moore) is even better. His 1985 recording at age 60 with Alfred Brendel found his voice less fresh, but the overall approach—singer and pianist—is still very moving. In recent years, many fine readings have been available, and a listener can hardly go wrong with many of them. This one by Russell Braun stands out from the rest and deserves special recognition.

One is struck first by the sheer beauty of his voice; it has much of the same warmth and honeyed sheen of Fischer-Dieskau's but with a darker and more burnished sound. He sings with a great suppleness and a gorgeous legato that produces a superb caressing of the words. Braun has glowing top notes and an even timbre across the two octaves of these songs. He employs a greater range of contrasting dynamics than any of the singers on the 18 recordings I compared. He uses a lot more rubato than others, allowing enough space between notes to produce phrasing that is distinctly different.

Victor Braun, the singer's father, recorded this music with Antonin Kubalek in 1992 for Dorian, but his voice is lighter and the recording suffers from a rather bombastic accompaniment. Mathias Goerne's highly regarded 2004 account presents a strong approach to the work, but his voice, wonderful as it is, does not have the same inherent beauty as Braun's.

The biggest thing that distinguishes Braun's recording from others is his slow tempos. Overall he takes about ten minutes longer than Fischer-Dieskau. The 4:33 timing for 'Der Leiermann' is a full minute longer than Fischer-Dieskau or Prey, and it lends added pathos to the final song. Braun's approach shows a deep emotional involvement in the songs. I found his passion moving, but some listeners may prefer a more cerebral approach.

This is a fresh approach to the cycle and is worth having for that reason, but it may not be the only recording you will want. The gold standard for *Winterreise* remains Fischer-Dieskau with Gerald Moore (DG, 1972) followed by either Thomas Hampson (EMI, 1997) or Andreas Schmidt (DG, 1992). This would be my third or fourth choice.

Braun's excellent accompanist is his wife, Carolyn Maule. Some may feel that singer and pianist go too far outside the normal conventions of interpretation. But in spite of any reservations one may have, the sheer beauty of his voice makes this recording worth having. Full texts and translations.

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